The Order of the Visitation

ITS SPIRIT AND ITS GROWTH IN ENGLAND

By the

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LONDON: BURNS & OATES, LIMITED

NEW YORK, CINCINNATI, CHICAGO: BENZIGER BROTHERS

CONTENTS

PAGE

CHAPTER I.

ITS ORIGIN AND GROWTH 7

CHAPTER II.

THE ORDER OF THE VISITATION IN ENGLAND 28

ILLUSTRATIONS.

SAINT FRANCIS DE SALES.

SAINT JEANNE FRANÇOISE DE CHANTAL.

BLESSED MARGARET MARY ALACOQUE.

SALES HOUSE, SHEPTON MALLET, 1810-1831.

"THE CLOISTERS," SHEPTON MALLET.

MOTHER MARY SALES WELD.

SALES HOUSE, WESTBURY-ON-TRYM, 1831-1896.

CONVENT OF THE VISITATION, HARROW-ON-THE-HILL.

The Order of the Visitation.

I.—*Its origin and growth.*

IN the summer of 1610, three centuries ago, the Order of the Visitation of the Blessed Virgin Mary was founded in Savoy. It may be considered justly as the joint creation of two great saints, St. Francis de Sales and St. Jane Frances de Chantal, although according to the depositions made by the latter during the process of canonisation of the former and many times repeated, the holy Bishop of Geneva alone was always regarded as the true founder by the first religious of the Order.

As might be expected, the work thus begun by these two heroic souls under God's inspiration was from the first blessed by Him in a remarkable way. Like the grain of mustard seed in the Gospel parable, which from being the least of all seeds grew to a tree in whose branches the birds of the air found shelter, the humble

beginnings made in the little house of *La Galerie* at Annecy, in Savoy, prospered and spread till its branches now flourishing in all parts of the world afford shelter to those who seek to serve God according to the wise and broad-minded legislation which so admirably reflects the spirit of the two saintly founders.

To understand the secret attraction which the houses of the Visitation Order exercise over the minds of those who have received God's call to serve Him according to this special form of religious life, it is necessary to know something of the origin of the Order, and to appreciate the supernatural principles which animated St. Francis de Sales and his spiritual daughter, St. Jane Frances, and which are reflected in it.

St. Jane Frances was born at Dijon in 1572. Her father was M. Bénigne Fremyot, a man of good family, who subsequently became the second President of the Parliament of his city of Dijon. At the age of twenty she married the young Baron de Chantal, an upright and religious man of the world, as well as a distinguished soldier. The few years of their married life were passed most happily as true Christians and devout Catholics. In fact their household is described by one who knew it well as a model Christian family. One of the witnesses, exam-

ined for the canonisation of St. Jane Frances, declared that she and her husband showed at their home at Bourbilly "an example of the most saintly marriage it was possible to conceive." During the frequent absences of M. de Chantel, the entire management of the household and estates was placed by him in the hands of his young wife, and it was thus early in life she acquired those business habits which subsequently proved so useful in the successful administration and direction of the Order which she was destined by God's providence to rule. In the regulations for the government of her household and of her husband's property, which she drew up in her early married life, we see reflected the true spirit of the "valiant woman" of the Holy Scripture, which subsequently St. Francis de Sales declared to be in so pre-eminent a manner the virtuous characteristic of his spiritual daughter.

Madame de Chantal's happy and saintly married life was of brief duration. Her husband, killed accidentally during a hunting excursion in 1601, left her after eight years of happy intercourse with the charge of the four children who survived out of the six with which the union was blessed. From this time the soul of the young widow sought consolation for her loss in

more assiduous religious exercises, and she sustained herself by the thought that she might some day devote herself wholly to God in religion. Though the charge of her family was obviously her first care, from the date of her husband's death the possibility of her ultimately embracing some form of religious life seems to have been, in fact, present constantly to her mind; and although the fulfilment of her desire was to be delayed for some years, she was in reality preparing all the time, in the best possible way, for the call which God had destined to give her.

Meantime, whilst waiting for a definite indication of God's will in her regard, she devoted herself to the care and education of her young family. At the same time, convinced that it was her duty to do so, she took upon herself the charge of her father-in-law's household under difficult and trying circumstances. All the business and constant worry entailed by these duties, which could hardly have failed to distract the souls of most people from the things of God, and to have proved a distinct hindrance to the cultivation of the supernatural ideals of the true Christian life, only tended to draw her soul nearer to God. Such duties performed in her spirit made her realise more truly her dependence on His fatherly providence, and enabled her to

practise more perfectly those virtues of self-abnegation and devotion to others, which at this time and ever after, characterised her life. All this time of waiting, moreover, only served to convince her of her vocation to the supernatural life, and that the call would come in God's good time. This conviction constrained her to prepare herself for the future, as far as was possible, whilst in the world, by the exercise of the essential virtues of the cloistered life.

In 1603 Madame de Chantal took a step of great importance towards the fulfilment of her ardently desired wish to give herself to God. In the 17th century, many persons of all states and conditions in the world, widows, young men and maidens, and even married people, imitating the example of the middle ages, linked themselves to some religious Order as extern members. Though kept by duty or circumstances in the world, engaged in the care of a family or of a business, they yet in great numbers practised the penances and good works of the Franciscans or Dominicans, and in their third Orders they led, as far as was possible in their family circles, the lives of religious. Madame de Chantal was specially attracted to the Order of St. Francis, and she was received into it on 6th April, 1603.

In the following year the saintly widow came under the influence of one of the most sympathetic and clear-sighted directors the grace of God has ever produced for the good of those souls He has called to the higher paths. This was the gentle, the broad-minded and yet at the same time the strong and firm Bishop of Geneva, Saint Francis de Sales, who was already known as the spiritual adviser of many devout souls, and as a preacher who drew all hearts to himself and God. The authorities of Dijon invited the Bishop to preach the Lent in that city, and Madame de Chantal's father asked her to come to her native city to have the opportunity of following the spiritual conferences to be given by him. From the first the two Saints felt their souls attracted to one another, and St. Jane Frances in a very short time placed herself unreservedly in the hands of the Bishop, telling him of the desire she had long felt of renouncing the world and consecrating herself to God in religion. The more intimately the Saint as director came to know the soul of his penitent, the more was he struck with the work of grace manifested by her humility and modesty, and by her earnestness in all that regarded the spiritual life. At the same time the extraordinary measure of common sense which Madame de

Chantal possessed and the strength of her character astonished him in no small degree, and gave him assured hope that she was called by God to do some great work for Him in the Church. "It is impossible," he said after knowing her for a short time, "to unite together a greater breadth of mind with more profound humility. She is as simple and straight as a child, and possesses a judgment both solid and weighty—*solide et élevé*: her soul is truly great and she possesses the courage to undertake holy works beyond the powers of her sex." The Saint likewise frequently repeated the judgment he formed on first making her acquaintance: "I have found in Madame de Chantal at Dijon what Solomon could scarcely find in Jerusalem, a valiant woman."

Time went on thus for another three years, till, at the feast of Pentecost, 1607, Madame de Chantal found herself at Annecy, whither St. Francis de Sales had called her in order to satisfy her and himself as to her vocation to the religious life. After testing her obedience the Bishop described to her the general lines of the Order of the Visitation, which in the lights he had gained in prayer he had conceived as the mode of life to which God called his saintly penitent. But it was still not for some time that the

project of this new foundation which satisfied Madame de Chantal so well could be commenced. She was yet occupied in the charge of her young family and in other secular affairs from which she could not free herself. For some time also she was severely tried by her relations and friends, who urged her to make a second marriage, and left her no peace or consolation save in the fatherly and tender sympathy of St. Francis de Sales.

At length these difficulties began to resolve themselves, and the relations of Madame de Chantal came to see that continued opposition to the fulfilment of her desires was impolitic and unreasonable. The marriage of one of her daughters, in 1609, was made the occasion of a final settlement. St. Francis de Sales was present to perform the ceremony, and in concert with others he ultimately persuaded the father of Madame de Chantal, M. Fremyot, to consent to her departure to some religious house. After some further delays caused by family troubles and sickness, the Saint finally left Dijon on 29th March, 1610, and reached Annecy, where St. Francis of Sales was awaiting her, some days later.

The saintly Bishop had fixed upon the feast of Pentecost, 1610, as the most appropriate day for

beginning the new Institute, but the house in which to begin, upon which he had counted, at the last moment was not to be procured, and a delay till Trinity Sunday became necessary. According to Madame de Chantal's depositions at the canonisation of her saintly Confessor, the Bishop's first intention was to give to the Order he was founding the title and scope of a Congregation, but on this point he surrendered his judgment to that of the Archbishop of Lyons, Cardinal de Marquemont.* Moreover, speaking of the Order in another place, she says that St. Francis placed the Order under the special protection of Our Blessed Lady, "and named it after the sacred mystery of the Visitation, procuring for us the privilege of saying the Little Office of the Blessed Virgin only, a favour which has since been confirmed to us in perpetuity by our present Holy Father, Pope Urban VIII. The intention of our Blessed Founder in doing

* "He (St. Francis) had a great wish to restrict our Order to the simple title of a Congregation, and on this subject the illustrious Cardinal Bellarmin was of his opinion; but the late Archbishop of Lyons (Cardinal de Marquemont) urged him so strongly in the matter that our Blessed Founder consented, in deference to him, to place us under the rule of St. Augustine, writing to his Eminence in these words: 'I repress my desires, submitting to the decrees of God's providence. I am silent and acquiesce in your judgment and counsel.'" *From Depositions of St. Chantal.*

this was that there should be an Order in the Church of God specially consecrated and dedicated to sing day and night the praises of that Sovereign Queen, of whom he speaks so worthily and in such high terms in his books, and to whom he has even dedicated his *Treatise on the Love of God*."

In his first conception of the Order, the Bishop had included the active works of visiting the sick, instructing children and others in their religion, and the like acts of Christian charity. It is said to have been as a record of this scope, which had subsequently to be partially abandoned, that the title of Visitation was given to the Order. There were, however, other reasons for the name, the main one being the devotion of the Bishop to the incident of the Visitation in Our Lady's life. St. Jane Frances in her depositions declares that it was his purpose to revive "the devotion to the Blessed Virgin under the title of the Visitation, which devotion had, before the ravages of heresy, been practised in the mountain district of Voiron, about nine miles from Geneva."

In speaking of the beginnings of the Visitation Order, it is well to bear in mind the high ideals of religious life which the saintly Bishop had, and his ardent zeal for the souls of those who

had been led to serve God in the cloister. St. Jane Frances, after his death, deposed that one day she heard him say: "If a person living in the world were to ask me what she must do in order to save her soul, I should answer: *Keep the commandments of God and you will infallibly do so.* But to a Nun I should say: *By giving yourself absolutely and entirely to God.* The King of kings will have all or nothing, He will reign alone or not at all. It will not be God who will judge Monks and Nuns, but the Saints, who will say to them: 'We had the same flesh and bones as you have, and yet we walked along the road marked out for us by our Master.' He used also to say that it was better to be cold than lukewarm, because coldness was at least recognisable, but that the lukewarm were intolerable to our Divine Lord: that He would cast them away from Him."

These high ideals the Bishop set before those who were destined to begin the new Order of the Visitation at Annecy. On the 6th of June, 1610, Madame de Chantal and her two companions, Mademoiselle Marie Jacqueline Favre and Mademoiselle Charlotte de Bréchard, after having received communion from the Bishop, spent the day in visiting the various churches of the city, and giving consolation to the sick poor.

In the evening they took possession of the little house of *La Galerie*, which had been prepared for them, and on their knees listened to the reading of the rule of life which St. Francis de Sales had put into writing for their guidance. The Community consisted of the three above named, and an out-sister named Anne-Jacqueline Coste.

The following days were partly occupied in consultation with the Bishop to determine the most convenient order of the day, the special manner of life, the best method of reading and singing, which the Saint desired should always be correctly and reverently done in the church. It was upon July 2nd, 1610, the feast of the Visitation itself, that at Vespers the little band of sisters sang their Office for the first time, St. Francis of Sales assisting at it on his knees, leaning upon the rail at the entry of the choir absorbed in prayer.

The trust of the young Community in God was early in its existence tried severely. About five weeks after the commencement of the young Institute, Mother de Chantal fell so seriously ill of a fever that her life was in grave peril. It was under these circumstances that St. Francis de Sales gave the sorrowing sisters a lesson in the trust they should always have in God's

Providence. He said to Mother de Chantal in the presence of the sisters, who all knew how he had set his heart upon the foundation: "Perhaps God intends to be satisfied with our attempt and with the goodwill with which we set to work to prepare this little society for Him, just as He was satisfied with the readiness which Abraham showed to sacrifice his son. If then it is His good pleasure that, having reached the middle of our journey, we should turn back, His Will be done." And this, says St. Jane Frances in relating the incident, "was a heroic act of resignation on account of the great benefits which he expected that souls would derive from this manner of life."

The trial, however, was not to be made in all its fulness, and Mother de Chantal quickly recovered and resumed the charge of her small Community. By the end of the first year five more devout souls had united themselves to the three original members, and at the end of the second year there were ten in the Community. St. Francis de Sales devoted much of his attention to the training of the nuns of the new Institute, and it is in his *Conferences* that we must look for the spirit of the new Order. Most of the sisters had come from families of wordly distinction and had no other desire, on

embracing the religious life in the Visitation Convent of Annecy, than in obscurity, poverty and self-sacrifice to draw nearer to God, and thus to remove all that interfered with full intercourse with Him and the supernatural world round about them, which is the true object of all religious life. To these souls, athirst for spiritual teaching, St. Francis gave these familiar *Spiritual Conferences* at the beginning of the Institute, during rather more than two years, from June 1610, to October 1612. These precious *Spiritual Conferences* have been thus described: "Providence had given them (the sisters) in the person of St. Francis de Sales a master capable of developing such high aspirations. They all venerated him as an Angel of God, and had no less confidence in his devotion than faith in his wisdom. All were humble enough to demand from their teacher the imparting of the most elementary knowledge concerning the spiritual life, and enlightened enough to receive with delight and full appreciation the most sublime instructions. On his part, our Saint appeared in the midst of them less like a legislator imposing laws, than like a father teaching his little ones to walk. There was therefore on both sides a close intimacy: a child-like freedom which yet lacked nothing in respect and reverence,

a fatherly tenderness which yet was never wanting in firmness. The holy Founder, we may venture to say, literally fulfilled the functions of Master of Novices."

The constant guiding hand of the saintly Bishop was necessary during the early years of the Institute, since his letters show us that whilst recognising the need of some such asylum for souls seeking God, he had not made up his mind exactly what should be the special end and object of the Order of the Visitation. The only point that was from the first clear was that there were many pious and generous souls able to make the most heroic sacrifices for God, who by reason of delicate health or constitutional weakness were yet prevented from entering the more severe Orders, like the Carmelites, Poor Clares, Dominicans or Ursulines. Though in every other way fitted for the life of the cloister, such souls were forced on account of the weak state of their health to remain in the wordly state which they disliked. It was to meet such cases that St. Francis first thought of the possibility of establishing a new Order where the austerities of the religious life, as usually practised at that time, might be mitigated for such as otherwise would not be able to have the help of the cloistered life to lead them along the

path of perfection. "I hope," writes the Bishop in one letter, "that this Congregation will be a pleasant and fitting refuge for those who are not strong; for without much corporal austerity, they practise all the essential virtues of the devout life."

"They say the Office of Our Lady and make their mental prayer. They work, keep silence, practise obedience, humility, and have nothing of their own. Quite as much as in any monastery in this world, their life is a life of love of God, an interior life full of peace and mutual edification."

The Saint then goes on to point out that in the first instance he had wished the sisters to be occupied in active works of charity towards the sick. Most of the nuns at the beginning of the 17th century had taken refuge from the world behind high walls and impenetrable grilles, where they occupied themselves in prayer and in the sanctification of their own souls. They never went out of their cloister to visit the sick, to console the dying, or to perform other works of Christian charity to others. St. Francis de Sales saw at the moment when first the idea of the Visitation Order came to him that there was great need for some body of devout women who might unite to their own life of prayer the



SAINT JEANNE FRANÇOISE DE CHANTAL.

(Foundress of the Order of the Visitation.)

useful, necessary and specially blessed service of others in the various works of charity. So, as he writes: "After their profession the sisters go out to wait upon the sick, which they do, by God's help, in great humility."

With regard to the enclosure, this is what he determined as sufficient to begin with. "No man is allowed to enter into the living parts of the house except for such matters for which they may go into all the strict monasteries. Women also may not enter the enclosure without leave of the Superior, by whom I mean the Bishop or his substitute. As for the sisters, after their year's noviciate they go out, but only to serve the sick."

The active side of the Order of the Visitation, the memory of which is preserved in the name given to it, was subsequently given up, as other religious Orders, and notably the Sisters of Charity founded by St. Vincent de Paul, met this hitherto pressing need. Saint Vincent de Paul, on the death of St. Francis, became the confessor of Saint Chantal, and it is very possible, and indeed probable, that he derived the idea of the mission and scope of the Sisters of Charity which he founded by learning from his penitent the original idea of St. Francis.

One matter upon which Saint Francis de Sales

insisted very strongly as necessary, especially in a Community in which corporal austerities were purposely much mitigated, was the necessity of self-sacrifice and the constant and thoughtful service of others. Early in his direction of Madame de Chantal the Bishop had given her his advice on this matter: telling her that her love and devotion to God, which prompted her to rise very early in the morning, should also tell her not to make her maid suffer by having to rise even earlier to attend to her. So in the convents of the Visitation the Saint insisted upon the sisters being united by mutual love as well as by their vows. His common sense rejected the notion that it was right for religious to cultivate the supernatural virtues to the detriment of the natural. This is why in his *Spiritual Conferences* he insists again and again upon such ordinary Christian virtues as cordiality, generosity, simplicity and the rest. In one of these *Conferences* he says: "I have always considered that (the peculiar spirit of the Visitation) is a spirit of profound humility towards God, and of great gentleness with our neighbour, the more so because, treating the body with less severity, it must all the more foster kindliness of heart. All the ancient Fathers agree that where rigour of corporal mortificaton is want-

ing, there ought to be more perfection of mind; therefore humility towards God and gentleness towards your neighbour must in your houses take the place of the austerity of others . . . The spirit of gentleness is so absolutely the spirit of the Visitation, that anyone who should wish to introduce into it any more austerities than there are at present would instantly destroy the Visitation. This would the more certainly be the case, since it would be done in opposition to the very end and object for which the Order was instituted—namely, to be able to receive delicate women, maidens and widows, whose physical powers are not great enough, and who are not inspired and drawn to serve God and to unite themselves to Him, by means of such austerities as are practised by other Religious Orders."

From this and similar passages which might be cited, the object the holy Bishop of Geneva had in founding the Visitation Order is clear; and no less clear was the spirit which he desired to instil into the devout souls who, under him and St. Jane Frances de Chantal, were the first to give themselves to God in the Congregation. The essential object of all religious life is, of course, the same in all Orders—namely, the union of the soul with God. The means by which this object is attained, however, differs very con-

siderably, although the practise of prayer must, of course, ever remain the chief path by which the individual soul must seek to unite itself to the Heavenly Spouse it has chosen on entering into religion. No one realised this great fact more certainly than did St. Francis of Sales and St. Jane Frances de Chantal, and every provision was made by the external aids furnished by the established constitutions to assist the sisters to mount the ladder of perfection and to attain to that union with God in prayer which is within the power of every professed religious. The main obstacles which retard the spiritual journey were removed by the vows of religion ; and in place of great corporal austerities, which would have defeated the main object of St. Francis, which was to give the possibility of the true religious life to the aged and infirm, he substituted the constant mortification of self in serving and assisting others, and insisted that all who desired to have the true spirit of the Visitation Order must strive to manifest the possession of every natural virtue and grace, especially those which had to be exercised in relation to others.

The Order thus begun by the two saintly founders in 1610 quickly gained esteem, and by the Providence of Almighty God a second



BLESSED MARGARET MARY ALACOQUE.

(Religious of the Visitation.)

convent was erected in 1615 at Lyons. At the present day it counts 175 convents, of which 143 are in Europe. France, the country of its birth, still has the greater number of these Visitation Convents, 69 in all, although six or seven have been closed and the sisters exiled for the crime of being religious engaged in teaching. As to this, the Rule allows the nuns, although enclosed, to educate young ladies, and a great number of houses have availed themselves of this permission. In the United States the Visitation establishments number 21, in Mexico there are four, and in South America seven, and most of these have large and flourishing schools.

The Order of the Visitation has no Mother General, each house being separately governed by its own Superior under the jurisdiction of the diocesan Bishop. Although each house thus forms a distinct family, the houses of the Institute keep in touch with one another by yearly communications in the form of letters sent round to each house. The Convent of Annecy, as the birthplace of the Order, and according to the wish of the Founders, although possessing no jurisdiction, is always regarded as the centre with which all the branches should be united. To it they have recourse in any difficulty concerning the observance of the Rules.

II.—*The Order of the Visitation in England.*

HAVING thus briefly described the foundation of the Order, and pointed out some chief characteristics of its spirit, we may now turn to review the connection which the Order has with England. Established as the Order was after this country had fallen away from the Faith, it was hardly to be expected that during the days of persecution any branch of it would have been transplanted thither. Still even in the dark days for Catholicism of the 17th century, there was serious talk of erecting a convent of the Visitation in this country. The project came to nothing; but the mere fact of the intention is of interest, and the idea was conceived under the following circumstances. The great modern devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus took its origin, as all know, in the Visitation convent of Paray-le-Monial, where our Blessed Lord, in the latter part of the 17th century, made choice of a nun, Blessed Margaret Mary Alacoque, to reveal His pleasure in regard to this form of

worship, and to make known His desire that she should propagate it throughout the world. The director of this holy soul was the celebrated Jesuit Father, Claude de la Colombière. Now in the reign of King Charles II, between 1675 and 1681, Father de la Colombière came over to England, some say as chaplain to Mary of Modena, the wife of the Duke of York, subsequently James II, and during his stay he preached in the Chapel Royal at St. James' about the new devotion, and urged it upon his hearers.

At the same time there was a serious talk of establishing a house of the same Visitation Order in France, specially intended for English ladies who desired to embrace the mode of life, but who could not do so in their own country because of the penal laws. Writing to the Superior of the convent at Paray-le-Monial, Father de la Colombière says: "On travaille toujours pour fonder un couvent d'Anglaises sous votre règle, ce sera à la Boulogne en Picardie." An English version of the Constitutions of the Visitation Order, which was printed in Paris in 1678, seems also to point to the fact that the idea was really taking a practical form, when the serious consequences to Catholics of Titus Oates' plot, which took place that same

year, would seem to have put an end to the project. From another letter it would likewise appear that it was Mary of Modena herself who had intended to found this English convent of the Visitation at Boulogne, just as during her exile from England Queen Henrietta Maria had founded that of Chaillot, near Paris. Though nothing came of the scheme for an English house, Queen Mary of Modena continued to have intimate relations with the Order ; and in 1701, on the death of her husband, James II, she retired to the convent at Chaillot—the house founded by the Queen of Charles I—and died there in 1718.

Half a century later, in 1776, the project of an English house of the Visitation was renewed by Lady Stourton, the widow of the 14th Lord, well known for her unbounded charities to poor Catholics in the 18th century. Hearing that Mary Weld, only daughter of the Squire of Lulworth Castle, intended to become a religious, she proposed that they should join together in founding a house of "the daughters of St. Francis." Mary Weld, however, after carefully weighing the matter before God, was attracted ultimately to the Franciscans, in a convent of which Order at Bruges she had been educated, and she joined the English house of Poor Clares

at "Aire in Artois." This community was dispersed at the time of the French Revolution, and Miss Weld, in religion Mother Euphrasia, died at Clare House, Plymouth, on 12th March, 1823, having lived to see the nuns of the Visitation well established in England.

Twenty years or so after the failure of Lady Stourton's project, Almighty God inspired a Mrs. Tunstall with the desire of assisting to make the first English foundation of the Order. Catherine Tunstall was the eldest daughter of George Markham, Esq., of Clenby, Lincolnshire, and of his wife Mary Salvin, of Croxdale, "both persons of great virtue and firmly established in our holy faith, notwithstanding the severity of the penal laws." She was married to Cuthbert Tunstall, of Wycliffe in Yorkshire, and he, dying in 1790, left her with ample means. She had no family, but as the annals of the English nuns of the Visitation say, God "destined (her) to be the mother of many spiritual daughters." She had a great love for the Sacred Heart, a devotion peculiarly connected with the Visitation Order through Blessed Margaret Mary Alacoque, the instrument chosen by God to propagate it in His Church. She was also attracted to St. Francis of Sales, and had long been specially earnest in placing herself under his protection.

Desiring therefore, when left alone in the world by the death of her husband, to do something for the glory of God, she was inspired to set aside a considerable sum of money towards the establishment of a house of the Visitation Order in England.

To carry out her intention, it was first necessary for Mrs. Tunstall to secure the co-operation of other ladies of family and fortune. Just at this time she heard that Juliana, the eldest daughter of Mr. Thomas Weld, of Lulworth, the niece of the above-named Mother Mary Euphrasia, had expressed her wish to become a religious, and that her sister Mary was already inclined to the same state of life. Mrs. Tunstall approached the elder of these young ladies through her cousin Lady Arundell of Wardour. Miss Weld was already a fervent client of St. Francis de Sales, and at first, after having studied the *Constitutions* of the Order of the Visitation, she certainly felt drawn to that special method of life. After much prayer and thought, however, she determined to return to the Franciscan Convent at Bruges, where she had been educated, and to seek admission into the Order of the other St. Francis. The community at Bruges had to leave the country on account of the Revolution some short time after her entry, and

Miss Weld was professed in their new home at Abbey House, Winchester, taking the name of Sister Francis de Sales.

Before leaving home, Miss Weld had told her sister Mary Teresa of the projected foundation of the English house of the Visitation. Lady Arundell, too, spoke about it and encouraged her to regard it as God's vocation; and having "waited," as the annals record, "eleven years with surprising constancy and perseverance," Mr. Weld's second daughter, Mary Teresa, "became the foundation stone of the holy work." So did not, however, remain in England for any length of time after the departure of her elder sister to Bruges, but went with her father and family in 1792 to Liège, where her brothers were in the Jesuit College.

Meanwhile Mrs. Tunstall, anxious to procure a sister of the Order of the Visitation who might form the nucleus of the proposed English community, opened a correspondence with the Superior of the second convent of the Order at Rouen, which was understood to have the best reputation for its observance. Just at this time, and before anything could be arranged, the great storm of the French Revolution burst over the country. On 19th November, 1790, the religious of both convents were forbidden, in the name of

"liberty," to renew their religious vows; and then, as they unanimously declared that "they preferred death to the smallest infraction of their sacred obligations," they were imprisoned in one of their houses. Four hundred and thirty nuns and two hundred other ladies were detained in this way for nine months, and would have paid the penalty of their devotion on the guillotine had not the death of Robespierre, on 28th July, 1794, put a stop to the wholesale massacre of religious throughout France, which was to have taken place that very day. After this time more liberty was allowed to the sisters, and three of them, despairing of ever again seeing their religious observances in the old home at Rouen, found means to get to Lisbon, where they were welcomed at the Convent of the Visitation in that city. As these three sisters were destined by God's Providence to become the foundation stones of the English branch of the Visitation Order, their names should be known. They were; Louise Thérèse Grandin de Mansigny, who belonged to the first convent of the Order at Rouen; Thérèse de Chantal Hurard and Madeleine Angélique Heugue, both being nuns of the second convent in that place. In the house at Lisbon, newly founded from the centre of the Order at Annecy, and in its first

fervour, these three nuns passed six years, until indeed Providence brought them into relation with Mrs. Tunstall, the English lady who had been for some time hoping and working to establish the Order in England.

Mrs. Tunstall had seen the Rouen Communities of the Visitation, from which she had hoped to make her foundation, dispersed by the French Revolution of 1798. This seemed to put an end to her cherished project, and she had applied the money she had put aside for the establishment of the English convent to relieving the exiled French clergy who had sought refuge in England from the persecution of the revolutionary party. But chance, or rather Providence, gave her new hopes of being able to carry out her original plan. One day, late in the year 1802, Father Charles Forrester, S.J., Mrs. Tunstall's director, was travelling by coach from London to Wardour Castle. In the carriage was a French lady whom, in conversation, he found to be a certain Madame de Mansigny, sister-in-law of the Sister Louise, who, belonging to the first convent of the Visitation at Rouen, had sought refuge, as already pointed out, in the house at Lisbon in 1797, with two sisters of the second convent. Madame de Mansigny told Father Forrester that she thought it quite possible that

these three sisters would have no objection to help in founding a new convent in England. Mrs. Tunstall was informed of this, and Madame de Mansigny was asked to sound her sister-in-law as to her willingness to enter into the long-cherished plan.

At once Sister de Mansigny and the other two religious from Rouen accepted the suggestion with pleasure, as it seemed to be a providential means for re-uniting the scattered Communities in a convent where religious life should be possible. Sister Magdalen Heugue consequently wrote saying: "We shall not be wanting in anything, either spiritually or temporally: we shall wear our holy habit in the house, if not on the journey."

The negotiations took some time and were almost completed when, in May, 1803, war broke out between France and England. The authorities of the Rouen convents, who were to furnish some of the necessary subjects, at once withdrew their permission. "Great was the disappointment of our Sister Superior at Lisbon," says the annalist. "The Bishop of London (Dr. Douglass) and Mrs. Tunstall wanted French religious only, and three sisters did not make up the number required for a foundation according to the Rule." But a way out of the difficulty

was quickly found. The sisters at Lisbon recollected that two of the Rouen nuns had taken refuge at Saragossa, and they needed little persuasion to join in the project. By 15th August, 1803, consequently it had been arranged that they should proceed at once to Lisbon, bringing with them another nun professed in the Visitation Convent at Arles. The Superior at Lisbon lost no time in constituting the little Community, preparatory for departure. She appointed Sister Louise de Mansigny *Superior*, and Sister Thérèse Hurard *Assistant*, with Sisters Madeleine Angélique Heugue, Thérèse Euphrasie Dural, Joseph de Guy and Marie de Sales Clastre as the Community.

One difficulty was recognised at the outset. The appointment of Sister de Mansigny as Superior had been made in deference to the wishes of the foundress in England, no doubt because it had been through Madame de Mansigny, her sister-in-law, that Mrs. Tunstall had been brought into relation with the religious at Lisbon in the first instance. But although an excellent and exact religious, the mind of Sister Louise de Mansigny had been affected by the horrors of the Reign of Terror through which she had passed, and she was thought by those who were to accompany her to England

unfit for the office. In fact, arrangements were actually made by the Superior of Lisbon for the holding of an election immediately the little Community reached England, should the journey prove to have a bad effect on her mind, as was feared might be the case.

Bishop Douglass, of the London district, who had been interested by Mrs. Tunstall in the proposed new foundation in England, wrote to the Patriarch of Lisbon, Cardinal de Mendoza, to obtain his permission and help. He arranged also that Dr. William Fryer, the President of the English College at Lisbon, should supply the nuns with all the money necessary for their journey, which had been liberally furnished by Mrs. Tunstall. The President secured for them places on the "Duke of York" packet, and took infinite pains to arrange every detail of their journey, which was not easy. There was much to be seen to and guarded against, as Mrs. Tunstall had written to warn them of many possible dangers owing to the war with France and the threatened invasion of England.

The Cardinal Patriarch of Lisbon having urged them not to delay their departure, they received the Holy Communion, as if for Viaticum, on 14th September, and were accompanied on board the same morning by an English gentle-

man and two ladies, deputed by Mrs. Tunstall. "What was our astonishment," writes one of the nuns, "when the gentleman presented us with four letters of credit for 100 louis each," which could be used at ports of Spain and France in case of accident. The nuns congratulated themselves on the fact that their vessel carried dispatches for England, as they supposed that this would mean that it would be escorted by some man-of-war. They were soon, however, undeceived on this point, but "resigned themselves to the guidance of God."

Their journey was full of adventure. At first all the sisters were very ill, and on the fifth day out from Lisbon were much frightened by seeing a privateer in the distance. The following day they were chased by a French vessel, and whilst their captain prepared his ship for action the nuns prepared for death. They thus afterwards described these anxious moments: "The cannons were dragged on to the deck with much uproar, the sails were unfurled, and having brought a lantern wherewith to set fire to the cannons, the whole battery was directed on the side of the enemy." Ultimately, however, after a short chase and one summons from the French guns, the captain of the "Duke of York," considering

that prudence was the better part of valour, surrendered his vessel. Their captors treated the sisters well and landed them at Vigo in Spain, three days' sail from where they were captured. Here, through the good offices of the French consul at the port, they were given their liberty and were allowed to claim their belongings.

They now had reason to be thankful for the foresight of Dr. Fryer, of Lisbon, in having procured for them letters of credit, for they were able, by means of them, to pay their way and make immediate preparations for continuing their journey. A good Catholic family of Vigo, named St. Paul, became greatly interested in the nuns and in their work; but whilst arranging for them to proceed to Oporto, the ladies of the family tried hard to dissuade them from attempting to reach England during the duration of the wars which were then disturbing the peace of Europe. In part they were successful, for three of the small band, the two nuns from Saragossa and the one from Arles, allowed themselves to be frightened by these well-meaning friends, and giving up the project, as they then thought for a time, returned to Saragossa. As they were part of the Community, they gave the other sisters full powers to arrange for the new foundation

as they thought best, declaring that it was their intention of joining them later in England. Subsequently, however, they elected to remain at their old convent of Saragossa.

The remaining three nuns were determined to proceed to England, according to their promise, with as little delay as possible. On 31st September they set out for Oporto, helped by a princely donation from the sisters of the Order at Madrid. On their way they rested at the small town of Tuy, where an English priest, Father Green, had procured for them a lodging. It "reminds us," writes one of the nuns, "of Bethlehem, for there was no furniture . . . but simply rough stone walls, and a floor of boards so wide apart that we could see the horses in the stable beneath." The Bishop of the place assisted them on their journey, and with the good wishes and prayers of the Poor Clares, who had been their consolation during their stay at Tuy, the three sisters started off again on 4th of October. Four days later they reached Oporto, having once been taken for spies because of their English bonnets, which Mrs. Tunstall had provided for them.

At Oporto they were received by the Bishop of Aire, who was living in that city in exile from France with eight of his clergy. He insisted

upon their remaining with him whilst they were waiting for a convoy to take them to England. This was not to be ready for two months, as one had sailed only a short time before their arrival; but at last, on 8th January, 1804, they set out for England, and were landed at Falmouth without further accident or adventure, eight days after leaving Oporto.

At Falmouth, however, they were obliged by the authorities to wait till 29th January for permission to enter the country, and they then set out to visit the convent of Spetisbury, near Blandford, the new home of the English Canonesses of Louvain, who had settled there in 1799, with whom Mrs. Tunstall was then staying. Sister Thérèse de Chantal, speaking of their arrival, writes: "She (Mrs. Tunstall) came to meet us, and respectfully kissing our hands, expressed her gratitude for all we had done in order to second her pious projects." She gave each of the nuns copies of their *Constitutions*, which had been translated the previous year, to be ready for the new English foundation, by Father Forrester, S.J. The three daughters of St. Francis de Sales remained for six weeks at Spetisbury to rest after all their journeyings with their Augustinian sisters. Meanwhile a home was being prepared for them at Acton, near

London, and this they took possession of on 16th March, 1804.

The actual foundation of this, the first English house of the Order of the Visitation, is placed, however, on the feast of St. Joseph, 19th of March, because on that day the Bishop of the London district, Dr. Douglass, came to Acton to welcome them, and to determine the limits of the enclosure. The little property, called "Acton House," was situated close to the Protestant Church, and it is said to have been the residence of Lady Derwentwater at the time of her husband's execution on 24th February, 1719. The first thing that Bishop Douglass was required to do was to accept the resignation of Mother Louise Thérèse de Mansigny, who, as before noted, had been appointed at Lisbon Superior. What had been thought possible on her appointment had taken place. The hardships endured during the journey, and the "effect of living in an heretical country," had completely unbalanced her mind, and her resignation was necessary. She soon after retired to her own convent at Rouen. In her place Mother Hurard was elected by the other two sisters, and the election was confirmed by Bishop Douglass.

Many ladies now felt attracted to the "sweet

reasonableness" of the life of these daughters of St. Francis. Mrs. Tunstall herself entered the convent at Acton as a postulant, but quickly found out, to her great grief, that she was not fitted for life in a Community. The first English novice was a Miss Garnham, a native of Wisbeach, and on 6th May, 1805, she pronounced her vows. On 13th December in the same year the sisters received Miss Mary Weld, to whom reference has before been made, and about whom something more must be said.

Mary Weld, the second daughter of Thomas Weld, of Lulworth, had heard much about the nuns of the Visitation from her elder sister, who, as before related, had at one time thought of joining them, but who had subsequently recognised that God called her elsewhere, and had taken her vows in the Franciscan Community of Bruges. Mary had been educated partly at the old Bar Convent at York and partly by the English Franciscan nuns then at Bruges, but who are now happily settled at Taunton. After her sister had entered the convent abroad, Mr. and Mrs. Weld took their younger daughter on to the Continent, where they remained until the French Revolution, making itself felt, caused them to return in the early part of 1793 to Lulworth Castle. Miss Weld, at the time of



MOTHER MARY SALES WELD.

(Miss Mary Weld.)

(First English Superior of the Order in England.)

their return, was eighteen years of age, and she is described as being "brilliant and beautiful," and "likely to attain everything this world can give." She, however, had very distinctly heard God's call to the religious life, and from what she had learnt about the Order of the Visitation from her elder sister, and from conversations with Mrs. Tunstall and Lady Arundell, she had set her heart upon joining the daughters of St. Francis de Sales.

God's providence assisted her to accomplish her, or rather His, design in a truly wonderful way. Amongst the French clergy who had escaped from the horrors of the Revolution was Père Grou, a Jesuit and a celebrated writer on ascetical subjects. He found his way in his exile to Lulworth, where Mr. Weld's hospitality to the *emigrés* priests was well known. Mary Weld, on her return home with her mother in 1793, found Père Grou already settled in her home, and in him she quickly discovered that she was provided with a spiritual director of undoubted piety, and one who had been prepared by long experience to direct her soul in the paths of perfection. Placing herself unreservedly in his hands, he soon recognised the call she had received to the religious life. She, on her side, possessed great capacities and a generous spirit

which responded very quickly to the calls of grace and the training of so experienced a director. It is impossible in these fortunate circumstances not to recognise the providential preparation of a soul for the work God was to demand of it, which in this case was that she might become the "pillar and foundation stone" of the English convent of the sisters of the Visitation Order.

Père Grou spent most of his time at Lulworth in writing the spiritual works which have made his name so well known. Amongst others he composed the books called *L'Interieur de Jésus et de Marie*. The latter, as he says in the preface of the original manuscript, which he presented to Miss Weld and which was written expressly for her, is preserved in the archives of the convent at Harrow. In this are the following words: "I am writing for you, my daughter, as I consider that you are specially called upon to imitate the interior dispositions of our Blessed Lady. Our Lord has sent me this inspiration, therefore it is right that I should do all in my power to help you in such a holy vocation." In the preface to *L'Interieur de Jésus* he writes: "I have already addressed my previous work to you, my daughter. . . You cannot doubt that our Lord Jesus Christ Himself calls you in an



SALES HOUSE, SHEPTON MALLET, 1810–1831.

especial manner to the knowledge of His most Sacred Heart. He has prevented you by the blessings of His sweetness, and all His dealings with you testify that He wills you to be a spouse worthy of Himself. . . How ungrateful you will be if you fall short in any way of the measure of holiness which he demands."

By the advice of this spiritual director Mary Weld made a formal offering of herself to God on the feast of the Purification, 1795. Ten years, however, were destined to pass by before she was able to take her religious vows in the Order to which God's voice called her so clearly. For many years her father was reluctant to allow her to leave home, but finally she obtained his consent under curious circumstances, which have indeed often been related, but which may fitly find a place in this brief account of the establishment of the Order in England.

King George III, with Queen Charlotte and some other members of the Royal Family, sometimes visited Lulworth Castle. On one occasion Mr. and Mrs. Weld received the King and Queen at the chief entrance, surrounded with their children, all singing the National Anthem. The old King was greatly touched by this, and taking Mr. Weld aside, asked him: "Are all your children good? Are there none that give

you trouble?" "No, sir," was the reply; and the King with a sigh said, "Ah, then how happy you must be!"

In the end it was through this friendship of King George III with her father that Mary Weld obtained his consent to take the step she had long sighed for. The way this came about may be told in the words of the annals: "It happened towards the end of the year 1804 that Mr. and Mrs. Weld were invited to meet King George III at a house in the neighbourhood of Lulworth. During his former visits to the castle the aged King had been particularly pleased with Mr. Weld's family, and he was quite unable to comprehend how a beautiful girl like Miss Weld, to whom the world offered so many attractions, could renounce everything to become a nun. As soon as he arrived at this gentleman's house he enquired for his daughter Mary, and Mr. Weld had to order his carriage and go in great haste to fetch his daughter, who had remained at Lulworth. On their way she said to her father that she felt uncomfortable at the thought that the King would be certain to ask her when she was going to the convent; and 'you know,' she said, 'I do not know what to answer him.' The father . . . touched by the same grace which raised her above the world,



"THE CLOISTERS," SHEPTON MALLET.

assured her that he would no longer oppose her retirement from the world, which he saw had no charms for her."

In this way it came to pass that, accompanied by her father, Mary Weld arrived at Acton on 13th December, 1804. She was no stranger to the small band of sisters gathered together in this their first house, for she had visited the three French nuns on their first arrival at Spetisbury, and had called at Acton the previous year. Still she had to face many difficulties and interior trials, and it required much confidence in God for her to believe that the small beginnings in a tiny house, where the two old French nuns and a few novices formed the Community, could be destined to grow into a flourishing convent. She, however, was accustomed to place all her trust in God, and so she received the religious habit on 29th January, 1805, taking the name of Sister Mary Sales. The following year she was professed, and on 7th June, 1810, was elected the Superior of the community, which in these few first years had greatly increased.

It was soon obvious that the house at Acton was altogether too small for the needs of the Community, and shortly before the election of Sister Mary de Sales as Superior various friends of the nuns had been looking out for a more

suitable home for them. Lady Arundell recommended a house at Shepton Mallet, in Somerset, as suitable for a convent, and it was decided to move thither. The house at Acton was taken back by Mr. Selby, who had sold it to them, for the price they had given for it, and Mr. Thomas Weld arranged all the details of the new purchase at Shepton, and saw to the alterations of the house, to which they removed on August 21st and 22nd, 1810.

The annals of the Convent record the fact that the house required a good deal in the way of repairs and changes to adapt it to the needs of the sisters. Part of it had been a woollen manufactory and part was still shops with dwelling rooms above. It was situated also in a very low position, which quickly proved to be most inconvenient, and indeed hurtful to the health of the inmates. The Bishop of the Western district at this time was Dr. Collingridge, O.S.F., who had succeeded Bishop Sharrock, 17th October, 1809. He appointed the Very Rev. William Coombes the spiritual father of the Community, and his nephew, Dr. William Henry Coombes, as their Chaplain.

The reparation of the buildings, etc., took nearly two years to accomplish, and it was not until 1812 that the chapel and the enclosure walls

were completed, the works then having cost the nuns nearly £10,000. In the summer of this same year the Sisters began to experience great inconvenience from the low-lying position of the house. A small stream, which took its rise at Saint Aldhelm's Well, in the neighbouring village of Doulting, and which was used to turn the water wheels of the adjacent factories, suddenly overflowed. "It ran through the garden and under the choir, refectory and other parts of the house," and as the annals relate, "the tables in the refectory floated about like boats in the water." Much injury was done to the walls and the furniture, and after the flood had gone down the lower part of the house remained so damp that the health of the Community was greatly affected by it. "To avert so serious a calamity for the future, our very honoured Mother had prayers offered to St. Aldhelm, and promised to make a commemoration of the Saint on his feast." Their prayers were heard, and as the annals testify, there were no more of these inundations until about the year 1825, when the then Superior stopped the commemoration, apparently from some scruples as to ecclesiastical law. The flood immediately returned, and in the end became so serious that they were obliged to move to a more healthy situation.

In 1814 the Visitation nuns opened a free school at Shepton for the children of the poor, which at that time was the only one in the town. It was managed at first by a Sister Mary Lucy Hart, who had been born in the neighbourhood of Shepton, and who was the second sister to become professed in the convent after its establishment there. Between 1805 and 1831 thirty-three religious in all, many of them of well known English Catholic families, were received into the Order. In 1812 Mother Mary Sales Weld received her youngest sister Clare as a postulant. She was brought to Shepton by her brother, Mr. Thomas Weld, of Lulworth, who afterwards became a priest, and is known in Catholic history as Cardinal Weld. Eleven years later Mr. Weld brought to the convent his neice, Fanny Vaughan, who was professed as Sister Frances Angela.

In 1814 the lay-foundress of the convent, Mrs. Tunstall, came to end her last days with the sisters and be cared for by them. She was then advanced in years, in a very feeble state, and had lost the use of her eyes. She continued her charities, however, to the end, dividing her income into three parts, one to be spent on the Church, one upon the poor, and the other for her own needs and private charities. She had a

great devotion to the Poor Souls in Purgatory, and she never heard of the death of any friends without having a mass said for them. When she came to die herself it was discovered that, although she had founded many perpetual masses for the souls of the faithful departed, she had made no provision for herself, trusting, no doubt, that as she had ever remembered to have prayers and masses offered for others, her friends would do the same by her. Mrs. Tunstall, a Christian and a valiant woman, died October 28th, 1825. She was buried in the centre of the sisters' own cemetery.

The name of Mrs. Tunstall, the lay-foundress of the Visitation Order in England, recalls the memory of the two religious who first established the convent at Acton. Sister Magdalen Angela Heugue died 11th February, 1812, and the other, Sister Thérèse de Chantal Hurard, seeing that the English house was well established, returned to France in 1816.

In one way especially the Community proved themselves true daughters of the Visitation Order. Soon after the arrival of the Sisters at Shepton Mallet they determined to establish there a centre of devotion to the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus, which, as before noted, had commenced at their Convent at Paray-le-Monial

through God's inspiration to their sister in religion, Blessed Margaret Mary. The Society or Confraternity of this devotion was formally inaugurated in their convent chapel on 16th August, 1816. At this time also the sisters obtained permission from Rome to have the votive mass of the Sacred Heart on the first Friday of every month and on the Friday following the octave of Corpus Christi. In this way the nuns of the Visitation at Shepton were really the first to propagate in England the devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, which has since spread in so marvellous a way throughout the world.

The register containing the names of the Confraternity from 16th August, 1816, to 20th June, 1847, is still at Shepton Mallet, and the first name is that of Dr. Coombes, the Chaplain of the Convent, then follow those of the sisters in their order and entered in their own handwriting. Other Communities are enrolled *en bloc*, and many well-known Catholic names appear in the pages of the volume, such as Stourton, Clifford, Bodenham, Berington, Tunstall, Gillow, Weld. The names of many of the Benedictine monks, first established at Downside, a few miles away on the Mendip Hills, appear in 1818.

After the year 1825 the continual recurrence of



SALES HOUSE, WESTBURY-ON-TRYM, 1831–1896.

the floods seemed to call for the removal of the Community to some more healthy quarters. The damp state of the house undermined the constitution of many of the Sisters, and the reports spread about of the condition of things, making it even worse than the reality, had deterred some at the last from joining them. There were no novices forthcoming, and it began to be said that to join the Community at Shepton Mallet "was to seek an early grave." Mother Mary Sales Weld, who was elected Superior for the third time in 1828, was convinced of the necessity for removing the Convent. The fact, however, that the Sisters had spent so large a sum of money on their house was a grave objection, and moreover the Bishop, Dr. Baines, did not encourage the idea.

Another serious flood in 1829, and the refusal of the town authorities to turn the stream, finally determined Mother Mary Sales to look out for another home for her nuns. The friends and relations of the nuns urged a speedy removal, and a suitable house, with twenty-six acres of land, was found at Westbury-on-Trym, near Bristol. The bodies of twelve nuns who had died at Shepton, together with the remains of Mrs. Tunstall, were removed from the little convent cemetery and placed in the vault under the

chapel. This was the last act of the Community at Shepton, and on 17th May, 1831, the first detachment of nuns took possession of their new home at Westbury. During the removal the Choir office was continued at Shepton until there were sufficient numbers at the new Convent to carry on the perpetual round of prayer and praise which is so essential a feature in their life. The building of the chapel and cloister was not completed until 1834, and they were blessed by Bishop Baines on 8th December of that year.

The house thus happily settled at Westbury continued there amid the difficulties and consolations which are the lot of every observant Community till 1896. In 1846 Mother Mary Sales was released from the office of Superior for the last time, but lived for another twenty years, dying only in 1866. She was succeeded by Mother Frances Angela Vaughan, her neice.

In 1896, at the earnest request of Cardinal Vaughan, it was determined to move the convent once more to some place near London, and in the June of that year the property at Sudbury Grove, at Harrow-on-the-Hill, was purchased. Here a large portion of their convent and a convent chapel has already been built, and God has blessed them visibly by an increase of mem-

bers, whilst He has not neglected to manifest His love by sending them some trials.

It may be useful to add that besides the convent of the Visitation at Harrow, which is really the only English House of the Order, there is a convent of sisters, exiles from Germany, settled at Walmer. They came over in 1875, and were received and housed by their sisters at Westbury whilst negotiations were being carried on for their settlement in England. They have succeeded well in this country, have a flourishing boarding school, and they have done much to spread the devotion to the Sacred Heart in this country. They have in England the charge of the Archconfraternity of the Guard of Honour of the Sacred Heart.

THE END.